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Stay on Top of Your Mountain

September 26, 2019

Editorial Note: For the past seven years, Stance on Dance has asked a variety of dance artists at different points in their careers what "making it" means to them. Please join us in looking at what "making it" means (https://stanceondance.com/category/viewpoints/perspectives/making-it/) *as a dancer, artist and human.*

BY MISA KELLY

Did I "make it?"

It depends on who you ask.

If one were to ask the institution where I received my MFA in 1996, given I am not listed as a notable alumnus, in their view my career hasn't been significant enough to be listed. This implies, from this singular institution's view, I haven't "made it."

I generalize and ask myself, do I want to "make it" in the way academics, critics and glossy dance magazines measure success? Is it even possible to go on and "make it" by their standards at the age of 60? Is this mentality even relevant for where humanity is in its evolutionary process and the present planetary challenges, planet that, in my view, is very much in crisis going through a soft apocalypse of sorts?

Given the nature of who I am as a multi-modal maker, where I have chosen to settle, and my philosophical and spiritual views about the role of the free-range maker, alchemist and innovator in society today, it is clearly evident that these qualities, interests and values may never result in me "making it" by contemporary society's professional standards.

The road less travelled has chosen me and I've said yes to the adventure with no regrets (other than taking out a student loan to fund my MFA – useless degree, but great experience.)

With regards to my journey, I am reminded of a special-needs sibling who is also an artist. When I ask her for council after coaching sessions as a Peer Support, Leilani often cheerfully advises, "Stay on top of your mountain."

From the vantage point here, on top of my own proverbial mountain, life is good, really good and, in many respects, I feel as if I am living in nirvana day-to-day. I am an entirely different human as a consequence of pursuing a career in the arts and, although I feel as if I am just now discovering who I really am, I am profoundly grateful for the depth of awareness that does exist in this moment and am in awe of the potential of what there is yet to discover.

(https://stanceondance.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Misa-Kelly-photo-by-Kathee-Miller.jpg)

Photo by Kathee Miller

At this phase of my development, I have achieved all the things I once perceived were necessary to be and do as a dance-maker and my approach to this medium has relaxed considerably. My initial intention was to ground into integrity, value the process as opposed to the product, make strong work, grow as an artist, and share my work with the world beyond the confines of the small town in which I reside, building bridges of opportunities for other artists to different cities and countries even. I chose a path marked by generosity and inclusivity which I attribute, in part, to the Aloha spirit that has been passed on to me by my Hawaiian ancestors, and perhaps the essence of my Yugoslavian immigrant grandfather who was a proponent of Ghandi, light therapy, health food and socialism.

With support from my spouse as well as my best friend Sarah Wingren, I invested $35 in a self-help book after completing my dance-making training. Together, we co-founded a non-profit called Future Traditions Foundation. This served as an umbrella for my own work as a dance-maker. For 15 years, I wore the bulk of the creative and administrative hats for SonneBlauma Danscz Theatre, a project umbrellaed by the Future Traditions Foundation. The non-profit also served as a resource for the community with a focus on services not being provided by other arts organizations. We grounded into producing studio showings, festivals, and community and educational outreach programming.

We grew this boutique company and toured California and New York before allowing it to organically morph into its current incarnation: ArtBark International. As ArtBark, we developed a distinctive process that enabled us to create work together despite its creative members living in different cities and countries. Our creative and organizational style shifted to reflect our community's sense of conscious leadership, collaboration and co-creation. We focused on sustainability, shifted the paradigm in how the arts organize, and celebrated and actualized cross-cultural exchange, community building, and making socially relevant work in a mindful manner.

It feels nothing short of miraculous to think that not only have I intensely focused on my work as a multi-modal innovator, but I've also juggled other jobs as well as harnessed the power of the arts as a mechanism to overcome the impact of my adverse childhood experiences which led to the development of complex-PTSD and associated conditions. I coined the lifestyle 'an extreme sport' and am completely baffled, in hindsight, by this insane commitment to the craft and the many performance offerings as a cultural medicine.

Initially, it was not an easy journey at all. The most agonizing, heart wrenching and awkward stretch was growing to realize that the dance companies and choreographers celebrated as having "made it" by academia, critics and national publications was flat out not me. Those paradigms, mindsets and intentions presented themselves as the antithesis of my perception of why I was here on the planet.

The wonder of my present existence, this nirvana, I hold as a treasure close to my heart and share the breadth and depth of who I am with fewer and fewer humans, which, in part, is a factor of the aging process itself. I increasingly embrace an analog world and spend less time in virtual social media orbits than when I was working full-time with copious events planned in a single season.

My primary current interest is to initiate from a practice of *being* rather than *doing,* and to allow activity and intention to emerge from this state of being.

Does it still include dance? Sort of.

More than a decade ago, realizing I had bought the religion of contemporary dance training hook, line and sinker, I came to the realization that I might have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. I followed the impulse to "de-dancify" my body, which resulted in manifesting a process that is unique to me as a mover and maker.

I'm happy to say I've found the baby thrown out with the bathwater, and oh my word, the body of understanding. It is so not about what my teachers and mentors taught me. I have set the intention to write about these discoveries as a companion piece to my book *I Graduated with a Dance Degree, Now What? (https://www.amazon.com/Graduated-Dance-Degree-Now-What/dp/1548007838)*

A few months ago, I felt drawn back to the traditional space where dance and dance-makers often congregate, a community ballet class, which was really surprising to me, and I found myself there for entirely different reasons than previously. I was there for the sheer joy of connecting with community and, for as long as this brings me joy, I will continue to pop in and add happiness to the space.

Towards re-defining "making it," I ask you, the reader: Are you being true to you? Are you harnessing the integrity of your personal sense of what you came to the planet to be and do? Have you set the intention to explore this for the duration that this grows your soul? Are you willing to let go and move on with gratitude and respect when this stops growing your soul and allow something else to emerge from your research? If so, then congratulations; you have become your mountain! In my assessment, you haven't so much "made it," you *are it.*

What's left?

Only the tango with my maker's mystery knows but, in this moment, I can feel the wind under my wings. I stretch them out, and I settle into the infinite expanse of an inner blue sky and ride the awareness of watching my breath with tremendous gratitude for every soul who has supported my journey.

I am aware that entertaining thoughts of "making it" implies an arrival of sorts. One never truly arrives if one embraces that life is an adventure and, as long as there is breath in the body and awareness, one holds the capacity to grow.

Given this, circling back to an opening question, do I want to "make i*t?"* I respond, no; I want to continue to adventure, grow and discover. This is the way of the road less travelled that has chosen me. Breathing from a place of knowing, no matter how much I discover, there will always be more and, for as long as dance-making serves this growth journey, I will

most likely continue to engage.

Anything in the works?

Yes, I am actively engaged in a one-month creative residency in NYC with my international tribe.

Mahalo for reading!

Disclaimer: This is a singular perspective. Digest what resonates; up-cycle, de-cycle, re-cycle what doesn't.

(https://stanceondance.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Misa-Kelly-photo-by-Stephen-Kelly.jpg)

Photo by Stephen Kelly

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Misa Kelly *is a multi-modal free-range maker who has engaged in more than 200 happenings in relation to the arts. It has been a wild ride and, without the support of her beloved, Stephen Kelly, his family, and the Rudi Schulte Family Foundation, her wildest creative dreams would never have manifested. She looks forwards to travelling to Ireland to celebrate her 60th birthday this summer, being in the same space with ArtBark collaborators this fall, and continuing to be a voice and advocate for survivors of extreme abuse as a part of the sub #metoo movement. Presently, her primary focus is to initiate from a state of being rather than doing and to welcome activities that make her heart happy, such as singing to mother nature in the wilderness, sculpting, painting, drawing, moving, writing, enjoying the company of family and friends, hosting celebrations, and befriending the backyard birds, lizards, bunnies, squirrels and chipmunks.*

Follow her on Instagram @freerangemaker or visit www.artbark.org (http://www.artbark.org/), www.sonneblauma.com (http://www.sonneblauma.com/) or artbarkinternation.wixsite.com/brutifuloutsiderart (https://artbarkinternation.wixsite.com/brutifuloutsiderart) for more information.

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